

# Constructing and reinforcing political identities through rhetorical questions –

## An analysis of Mitt Romney's campaign speeches in the 2012 US presidential election



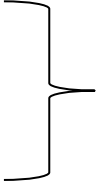
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# Objectives

- To elucidate how politicians compete for votes in election by using effective rhetorical strategies to construct and reinforce political identities
  - **positive** identities for oneself
  - **negative** identities for one's opponent
- To examine Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's use of RQs in his 48 speeches delivered to 18 states in terms of their:
  - (1) frequency,
  - (2) question type,
  - (3) topic,
  - (4) function.
- To examine how Romney's use of rhetorical questions (RQs) in the 2012 US presidential election varies with different target audience:
  - (1) safe states for the **Democratic Party**,
  - (2) safe states for the **Republican Party**,
  - (3) **swing** states.

# Outline of the presentation

- **Introduction**
- **Literature Review**
  - Previous analyses of rhetorical questions (RQs)
  - Four types of RQs
  - Functions of RQs in political discourse
- **Methodology**
- **Mixed quantitative-and-qualitative data analysis**
  - (1) **Swing** states
  - (2) **Democrat-safe** states
  - (3) **Republican-safe** states
  - (1) Frequency
  - (2) Types of RQs
  - (3) RQs in different topics
  - (4) Functions of RQs
- **Conclusion**

# Introduction

- Political speeches are primarily designed for motivating followers or gaining power through persuasion (Helms, 2012: 149).
- Two ways in which the persuader may seek to influence the receiver of a persuasive message (Charteris-Black, 2005: 10):
  - To confirm
  - To challenge } “existing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours”
- In the 2012 US presidential election, Mitt Romney had to accomplish the following political goals:
  - reinforcing his reputation as an “economic turnaround artist” and “financial whiz”
  - challenging President Barack Obama by attributing the country’s economic failing to Obama and his policies

# Introduction (contd.)

- Despite the following 2 significant political challenges,
  - (1) Obama had an obvious incumbency advantage (73.68% success rate since 1900);
  - (2) Obama's charismatic image continued to leave a fairly favorable impression on the American public despite a difficult first term in economic terms,

Romney still made the election one of the fiercest presidential elections in American history (with only **3%** difference in the nationwide popular vote between them).

- Among all rhetorical devices, Romney strategized and competed against Obama through the skillful use of **rhetorical questions**.
- In particular, his use of RQs allowed him to:
  - **Criticize his opponent via demagoguery** (Ephratt, 2007: 1922)
  - **Enhance the persuasiveness of his speeches**

# Literature Review

## 1. Previous analysis of rhetorical questions

1.1 Translatability of rhetorical questions (RQs)

1.2 Linguistic features & socio-cultural factors

1.3 Question types & pragmatic functions of RQs

# Literature Review (contd.)

## 2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.1 Yes/no question

- Demands only an acceptance or a denial of the proposed fact from the addressee (usually involving a simple “yes” or “no” answer);
  - e.g. “Did *Obamacare* create new jobs?”
- Enables speakers to follow up with more detailed information, or to use the question as an assertion by implicating the speaker’s expectations towards the answer (Han, 1998).

# Literature Review (contd.)

## 2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.2 *Wh*-question

- The *wh*-question allows for a wider range of possible answers, and this provides the speaker with the advantage of simply leaving the question to the listener to interpret the intended meaning (Monzoni, 2008).
  - e.g. “Where is the *economic recovery* we were promised?”
- The speaker can thus use *wh*- RQs in the following ways:
  - To convey the speaker’s knowledge base since RQs function like an assertion rather than a real question (Quirk et al, 1985);
  - To make a criticism;
  - To throw a challenge.



# Literature Review (contd.)

## 2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.3 Alternative question

- To offer a choice between alternative responses; however, the alternative question is “not always neutral” with respect to the speaker’s desire (Van Rooy & Šafářová, 2003: 304 ).
  - e.g. “Will America be transformed by *Barack Obama*, or will America be restored with the founding principles that have made this the *greatest nation* history has ever known?”
- Although two options are offered, it is obvious that Romney wanted the listeners to select the second option, which is consistent with his ideology.

# Literature Review (contd.)

## 2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.4 Declarative questions

- To emphasize or establish the truthfulness of a known fact (Balogun, 2011);
- Two types of declarative questions:
  - Structurally identical to declarative statements but uttered with interrogative prosody; its final rising intonation can signal surprise or disbelief rather than a true interest in getting information.
  - Question tag (especially in a falling tone),  
e.g. *"He said it is not that liberals are ignorant, it is just that what they know is wrong. And he has proven that, **hasn't he?**"*
    - The speaker is sure of the fact in the declarative question, and the question tag is used to urge the hearer to agree with the assumption(s) in the declarative question (Balogun, 2011: 44).

# Literature Review (contd.)

## 3. Functions of rhetorical questions in political discourse

- Persuasion

- An effective means of persuasion to get the approval and support of the listeners by affecting their attitude and emotion in political speeches (Nguyen, 2010).
  - e.g. “Wouldn't it be great if we could look back on the last four years with confidence that the crisis had been confronted and we'd turned the corner toward a brighter future?”

- Self-Promotion

- Politicians can more aggressively “self-promote” themselves and therefore gain immediate political power and credibility (Edwards, 2007)
  - especially by calling attention to their work on certain issues via the strategic use of RQs
  - e.g. “Do you want a president who will celebrate success, not attack it?”

# Literature Review (contd.)

## 3. Functions of rhetorical questions in political discourse

- Challenge

- RQs are often used as a challenging statement to solicit the listeners' commitment to its implicit answer, essentially by inducing mental recognition of its obviousness and its logical acceptability (Ilie, 1999: 128).
  - e.g. "*Did he **fix the economy**?*" (Candidates pointed out their opponent's incapability directly)

- Doubt-inducing

- RQs could be used to "induce doubt" inside the mind of the audience more subtly by giving the addressee more freedom to consider the implied message, allowing the speaker to play a more neutral role by avoiding the use of more leading and value-loaded declarations (Bendahmane & McDonald, 1992).
  - e.g. "*It is often asked why is this recovery the **slowest on record**?*"

# Methodology

We compared the results of the last 6 elections from 1992 to 2012, and categorized all states in the US into the following 3 types:

## 1) Democrat-safe states

(the Democratic Party won most of the time)

State \ Year	2012	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
California	D	D	D	D	D	D
Illinois	D	D	D	D	D	D
Iowa	D	D	R	D	D	D
Massachusetts	D	D	D	D	D	D
Michigan	D	D	D	D	D	D
New Hampshire	D	D	D	D	D	D
New York	D	D	D	D	D	D
Pennsylvania	D	D	D	D	D	D
Washington	D	D	D	D	D	D
Wisconsin	D	D	D	D	D	D

## 2) Republican-safe states

(the Republican Party won most of the time)

Year \ State	2012	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
Missouri	R	R	R	R	D	D
South Carolina	R	R	R	R	R	R
Texas	R	R	R	R	R	R

## 3) Swing states

- No certain trend
- The margin of victory is very small

State \ Year	2012	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
Colorado	D	D	R	R	R	D
Florida	D	D	R	R	R	D
Nevada	D	D	R	R	D	D
Ohio	D	D	R	R	D	D
Virginia	D	D	R	R	R	R

State \ Year	Florida	Ohio	Virginia	Colorado	Nevada
2012	0.88%	2.98%	3.87%	5.37%	6.68%
2008	2.82%	4.59%	6.30%	8.95%	12.50%
2004	5.01%	2.11%	8.20%	4.67%	2.59%
2000	0.01%	3.51%	8.03%	7.36%	4.54%
1996	5.70%	6.36%	1.96%	1.37%	1.02%
1992	1.89%	1.83%	4.38%	4.26%	2.57%
<b>Average %</b>	<b>2.72%</b>	<b>3.56%</b>	<b>5.46%</b>	<b>5.33%</b>	<b>4.98%</b>

# Methodology (contd.)

## No. of election campaign speeches by Romney analyzed in this study

(i) Democrat-safe states:	29	(California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin, and Iowa)
(ii) Republican-safe states:	5	(Arizona, Texas, Missouri)
(iii) Swing states:	14	(Colorado, Florida, Nevada, Ohio, and Virginia)
Total no. of selected speeches:	<hr/> 48	

# Methodology (contd.)

- Procedure for examining how the frequency, features and functions of Romney's use of RQs varied in the 3 different types of states.
  1. Counted the **number of RQs** in every speech
  2. Classified each token into one of the following 4 types:
    - **Yes/No question**
    - **Wh-question**
    - **Alternative question**
    - **Declarative question**
  3. Classified Romney's choice of RQs according to topics:
    - **Economics**
    - **Politics**
    - **Society**
  4. Classified each RQ token into types of functions:
    - **Self-promotion**
    - **Persuasion**
    - **Challenge**
    - **Doubt-inducing**

# Mixed quantitative-and-qualitative data analysis

- Within Romney's 48 election campaign speeches, and his use of **125** rhetorical questions:
  - Both **quantitative** (frequency-count) and **qualitative** (discourse-context) analyses were used to evaluate how Romney used RQs to mount a strong and feisty challenge to Barack Obama in the presidential election.
  - Provision of **specific examples** for comparison and discussion in terms of the distinctive features and functions of these RQs when Romney addressed different target audiences.



# Number of RQs in different states

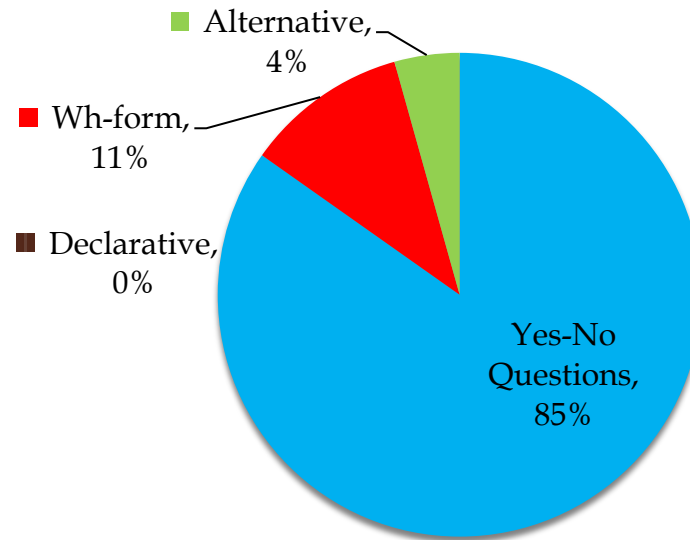
Table 5. Frequency of RQs in the safe states and swing states

State \ RQs	No. of speeches	No. of RQs	No. of RQs per 1000 words
Democrat-safe states	29	76	1.26
Republican-safe states	5	3	0.28
Swing states	14	46	1.51
Total	48	125	n/a

- Romney asked RQs most frequently in the **swing** states with an average of 1.51 RQs per 1000 words,
  - He asked RQs almost as frequently in the **Democrat-safe** states, averaging 1.26 RQs per 1000 words,
  - However he only asked 0.28 RQs per 1000 words in the **Republican safe** states.
    - Note: The number of RQs for the **Republican-safe** states are too small for the percentages to make a meaningful distinction, hence our analysis mainly focuses on the **Democrat-safe** states and the **swing** states.
- ❖ Romney is inclined to ask more RQs in states with more potential Obama voters.

# Swing states

- Frequency and types of rhetorical questions:



- Of the 46 RQs, **yes/no** questions dominated at 85% (39 tokens), while the *wh*-questions and alternative questions accounted for only 11% (5 tokens) and 4% (2 tokens) respectively.
- ❖ The high incidence of **yes/no** RQs is noteworthy. Generally, Romney adopted this more combative strategy in the **swing** states to distinguish himself as a worthy challenger.

# Swing states (contd.)

- Rhetorical questions in different topics

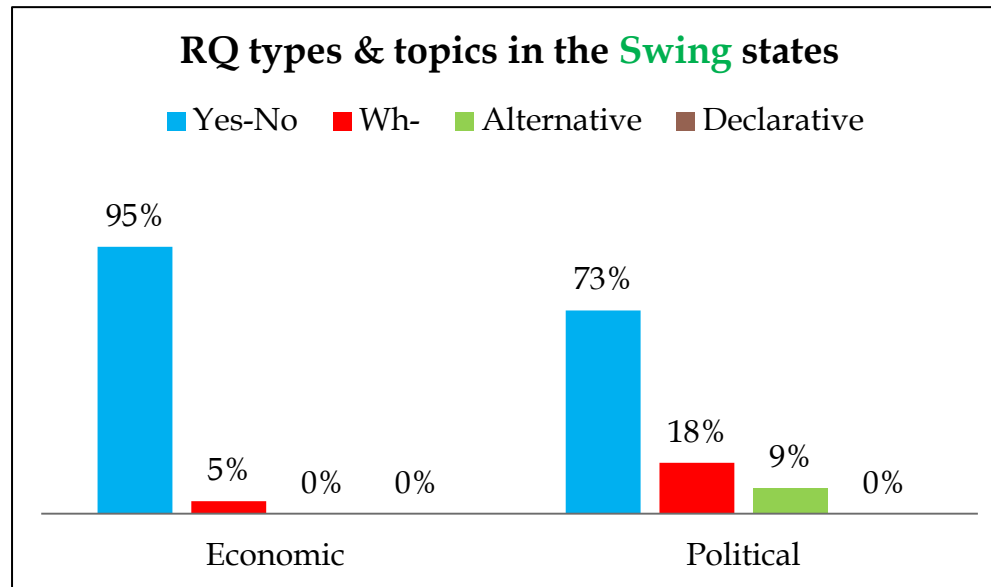
<div>RQs</div> <div>Issues</div>	Total	<u>Yes-No</u>	<u>Wh-</u>	<u>Alternative</u>	<u>Declarative</u>
Economic	22	21	1	0	0
Political	22	16	4	2	0
Social	2	2	0	0	0
Total no. of RQs	46	39	5	2	0

Note: The number of RQs for the **Social issues** are too small for the percentages to make a meaningful distinction, hence our analysis is focused on Economic & Political issues.

- Romney deployed equal numbers of RQs (22 tokens each) to both **economic** and **political** issues, but particularly for the **economic** issues, he tended to favor the more direct **yes/no** question type RQ.
- But even when raising **political** issues, Romney also greatly favored the more direct **yes/no** question over the less face-threatening *wh*-question (he was more feisty and aggressive, and more intent in engaging his **swing**-state audience).

# Swing states (contd.)

- Rhetorical questions in different topics



- For **economic** issues, Romney asked a very high percentage of RQs in the form of **yes/no** questions (95%).
- For **political** issues, he asked fewer **yes/no** questions (73%) but included a higher percentage of *wh*-questions (18%).
- ❖ Romney was very confident and direct in criticizing Obama's record on the economy and job creations in the **swing** states.

# Swing states (contd.)

- Functions of rhetorical questions

States Functions	Swing states		Democrat-safe states		Republican-safe states	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Self-Promotion	5	11%	1	1%	0	n/a
Persuasion	10	22%	30	39%	1	n/a
Doubt-Inducing	11	24%	26	34%	2	n/a
Challenge	20	43%	19	25%	0	n/a
Total no. of RQs	46		76		3	

Note: The number of RQs for the Republican-safe states are too small for the percentages to make a meaningful distinction, hence n/a (i.e. not applicable) for analysis.

## Swing states (contd.)

- **Functions of rhetorical questions**
  - **Self-promoting RQs**
    - enable Romney to gain support or agreement from the audience (by embedding an explicit message that he is the best candidate for U.S. president)
    - e.g. “Do you want a president who will celebrate success, not attack it?”
  - **Challenging RQs**
    - aimed at criticizing Obama with great **explicitness**
    - e.g. “Did he fix the economy?” (Romney pointed out Obama’s incapability directly)

# Swing states – Self-promoting RQs (contd.)

(Example 1: Romney's speech made in Ohio on August 14, 2012)

- RQ1. “Do you want a president who believes that your rights come from God, not from government?  
(AUDIENCE: Yes!)”
- RQ2. “Do you want a president who honors your right to pursue happiness, not as government commands, but as you choose?  
(AUDIENCE: Yes!)”
- RQ3. “Do you want a president who will work every day to bring us together, not tear us apart?  
(AUDIENCE: Yes!)”
- RQ4. “Do you want a president who will celebrate success, not attack it?  
(AUDIENCE: Yes!)”
- RQ5. “Do you want a president who will never, ever apologize for the greatest nation on earth?  
(AUDIENCE: Yes!)  
With your support, I will be that president.”

# Swing states (contd.)

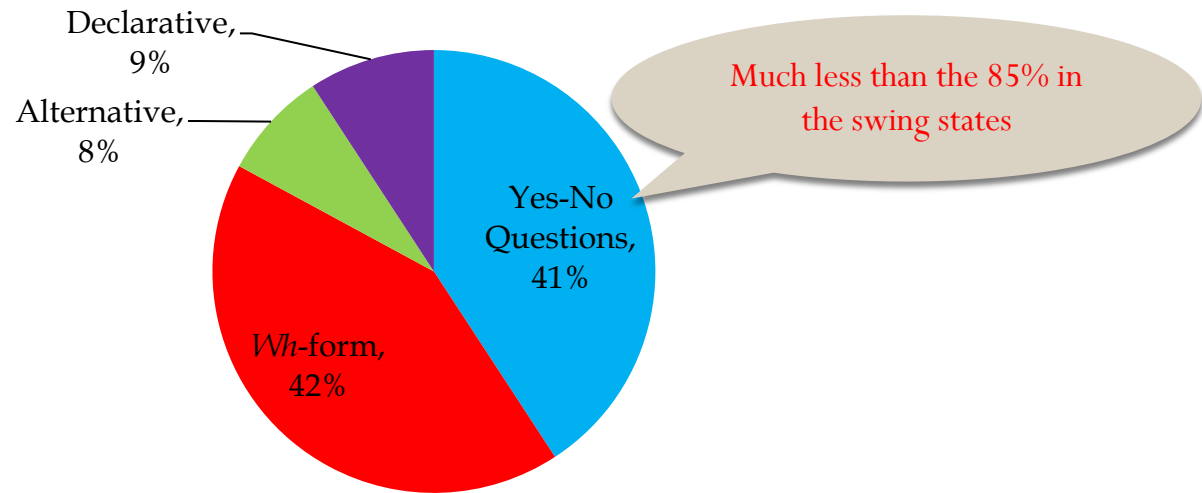
(Example 1: Romney's speech made in Ohio on August 14, 2012)

- The 5 RQs induce the audience to mentally and silently respond with a “Yes”:
  - enabling Romney to stimulate the swing voters to look into what he can do in comparison to Obama,
  - providing Romney with an excellent opportunity to express his determination to make changes to the country.
- By answering “With your support, I will be that president” at the end of this series of 5 yes/no RQs, Romney actively sought to:
  - establish common ground with the audience,
  - move the swing voters from hesitation to stand on his side.
- ❖ Yes/no RQs allow the speaker to unfold his grand vision and at the same time throw an underbelly punch at his opponent:
  - It is not surprising that Romney favored this strategy over the others, particularly in swing states where he needed to accomplish both tasks.



# Democrat-safe states

- Frequency and types of rhetorical questions:



- Of the 76 RQs, Romney asked 31 **yes/ no** questions, 32 *wh*-questions, 6 **alternative** questions and 7 **declarative** questions:
  - Fewer direct **yes/no** question
  - More indirect and less face-threatening forms: **wh**-questions, **alternative** questions, and **declarative** questions
- ❖ More mindful of diverse opinions, and more tentative rather than forceful in his rhetoric, and hence more polite.

# Democrat-safe states (contd.)

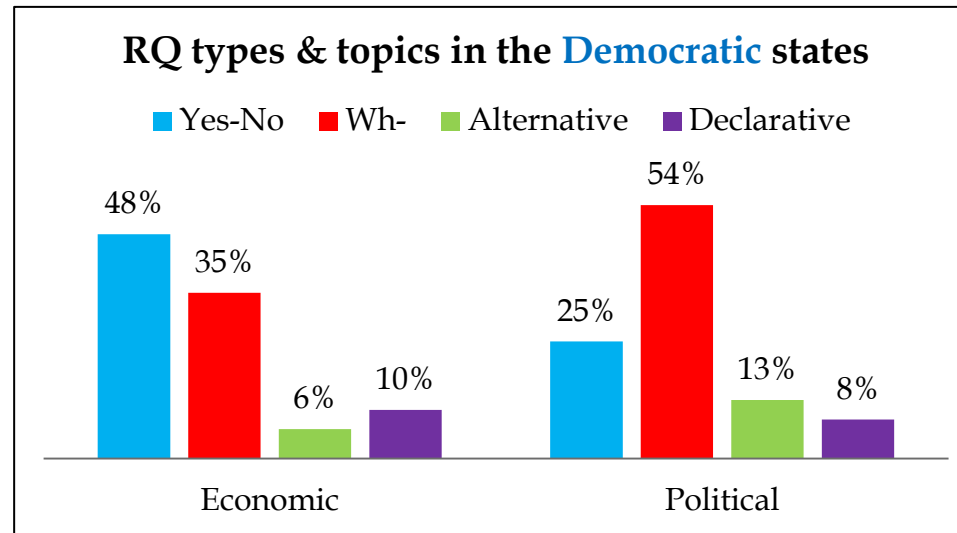
- Rhetorical questions in different topics

RQs Issues	Total	Yes-No	Wh-	Alternative	Declarative
Economic	48	23	17	3	5
Political	24	6	13	3	2
Social	4	2	2	0	0
Total no. RQs	76	31	32	6	7

- Romney focused more on the **economy**, which is his forte, when addressing a **pro-Democrat** audience that tended to favor the politically more experienced incumbent President Obama.
  - Twice as many rhetorical questions for **economic** issues compared to **political** ones (48 vs. 24 questions respectively)
  - More **yes/no** questions when raising **economic** issues than **political** ones (23 vs. 6 questions)
- ❖ Consistent with the general impression among pundits and the public alike that Romney was casting himself as an **economic whiz**.

# Democrat-safe states (contd.)

- Rhetorical questions in different topics



- Many of Romney's RQs related to **political** issues took the *wh*-question form (54%), but when he dealt with **economic** issues, Romney asked more **yes/ no** questions (48% of the time).
- A prudent approach:
  - Wh*-questions are more open-ended than a yes/no question, allowing Romney to avoid direct conflict with the supporters of Obama in the **Democrat-safe** states.
  - As political issues are more complex and abstract, it would be challenging to respond within the black-and-white confines of a yes/no question. However, by using a *wh*-question, Romney side-stepped the need to provide a clear response.

# Democrat-safe states (contd.)

- Functions of rhetorical questions

<div>States</div> <div>Functions</div>	Swing states		Democrat-safe states		Republican-safe states	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Self-Promotion	5	11%	1	1%	0	n/a
Persuasion	10	22%	30	39%	1	n/a
Doubt-Inducing	11	24%	26	34%	2	n/a
Challenge	20	43%	19	25%	0	n/a
Total no. of RQs	46		76		3	

Note: The number of RQs for the Republican-safe states are too small for the percentages to make a meaningful distinction, hence n/a (i.e. not applicable) for analysis.

# Democrat-safe states (contd.)

- **Functions of rhetorical questions**
  - **Persuasive RQs:**
    - served to synchronize speaker and addressee beliefs
    - e.g. “Wouldn't it be great if we could look back on the last four years with confidence that the crisis had been confronted and we'd turned the corner toward a brighter future?” (implicit persuasion)
  - **Doubt-inducing RQs:**
    - a more indirect strategy than persuasion RQs, often using impersonalization and passivization strategies
    - e.g. “It is often asked why is this recovery the slowest on record?”

# Democrat-safe states – Doubt- inducing RQs (contd.)

(Example 2: Romney's speech made in [Washington](#) on April 4, 2012)

RQ6. “**What** exactly does President Obama intend to do differently once he is no longer accountable to the voters?”

RQ7. “**Why** does "flexibility" with foreign leaders require less accountability to the American people?”

RQ8. “**And, on what other issues** will he state his true position only after the **election is over**? But instead of answering those vital questions, President Obama came here yesterday and railed against arguments no one is making – and criticized policies no one is proposing. It's one of his favorite strategies – setting up straw men to distract from his record.”

## Democrat-safe states (contd.)

(**Example 2:** Romney's speech made in [Washington](#) on April 4, 2012)

- The 3 open-ended *wh*-questions made Romney appear more objective.
  - Audiences were in principle free to arrive at their own conclusions.
- However, Romney immediately eliminated the opportunity for his audience to think of any possible answer beneficial to Obama. This he accomplished by:
  - again using the cascading *wh*-question technique;
  - immediately interjecting the brief post-RQ pause with his own answer and interpretation: "But instead of answering those vital questions, President Obama came here yesterday and ..."

# Republican-safe states

- Rhetorical questions in different topics

<div>RQs</div> <div>Issues</div>	Total	<u>Yes-No</u>	<u>Wh-</u>	<u>Alternative</u>	<u>Declarative</u>
Economic	0	0	0	0	0
Political	3	2	1	0	0
Social	0	0	0	0	0
Total no. of RQs	3	2	1	0	0

- In Missouri, South Carolina, and Texas, Romney asked only 3 RQs to **political** issues (including 2 **yes/no** questions and 1 **wh**-question).
- The low usage of RQs to **Republican-dominant** audiences is remarkable but not surprising (he has little need to persuade audiences that are already inclined to support his presidential bid in the first place).



# Conclusion

- Romney tended to ask more RQs against president Obama in **the swing states** and the **Democrat-safe states** than in his **Republican-safe** states.
- Romney tended to use the more direct *yes/no* RQs for both persuasion and self-promotion to construct a **positive** political identity for himself, while he used a wider range of RQ types to challenge and induce doubts to construct a **negative** political identity for Obama.
- Characteristics identified in Romney's use of RQs:
  - (1) In the **swing** states, most of Romney's RQs were *yes/no* questions (more direct and forceful in generating audience involvement).
  - (2) In the **Democrat-safe** states, Romney used both *yes/no* and *wh*-questions (to induce doubt in the rival candidate in a more subtle and indirect manner).
  - (3) In both the **Democrat-safe** states and the **swing** states,
    - the more forceful *yes/no* rhetorical questions focused more on **economic** issues;
    - the more indirect *wh*-rhetorical questions focused more on **political** issues

These moves constitute a safe and effective strategy for Romney to highlight his skill as a **financial whiz** while downplaying his lack of experience in **national politics** and **foreign relations**.

# Conclusion (contd.)

- Functions of Romney's RQs
  - Romney used **persuasion** and **doubt-inducing** RQs when addressing **Republican-dominant** audiences.
    - Even so, Romney rarely used RQs when addressing a friendly and supportive audience, compared to 'fence-sitting' (or rather, 'independent-minded') audiences – only 3 RQs for this target audience
  - In the **Democrat-safe** states, Romney asked more RQs to **persuade** and **induce doubt**, with a fair number of his RQs used as **challenges** as well.
  - In the **swing** states, Romney also used a fair number of **persuasion** and **doubt-inducing** RQs.
  - However, almost half of his RQs in the **swing** states were of a **challenging** nature.
  - Romney also engaged in more **self-promotion** in the **swing** states (11%) compared to the **Democrat-safe** states (1%).

# Conclusion (contd.)

- In this study we have seen how a skillful politician such as Mitt Romney effectively deploys rhetorical questions (RQs) to construct and reinforce political identities in electoral discourse.
- Different types of RQs were used with different frequency depending on the **type of audience**.
- The type and frequency of RQs used were also influenced by the **topics discussed**.
- RQs were used to enhance Romney's image as a strong challenger and viable candidate for the US presidency.
- His skillful use of RQs contributed to his impressive performance during the 2012 US presidential election. Although he did not win, his rhetorical skills provide us with a valuable opportunity to examine how politicians can effectively establish, negotiate and maintain common ground with the general public.

# Acknowledgement

We wish to gratefully acknowledge funding from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Internal Competitive Research Grant 2012-2014, HKPU G-YK85) for the research project entitled “Establishing Common Ground in Public Discourse: An Analysis of Electoral Speeches, Press Conferences and Q&A Sessions in Hong Kong”.

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